

University of Groningen

"The bower of Zeeland"

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Published in:
Renaissance Quarterly

DOI:
[10.1086/697816](https://doi.org/10.1086/697816)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Steensel, A. (2018). "The bower of Zeeland": Outdoor places in Walcheren 1600-1820. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 71(1), 310-311. <https://doi.org/10.1086/697816>

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It remains unclear, for instance, why news about Dutch attacks on Iberian strongholds in Asia should not have carried “the implicit promise of imminent Spanish ruination” (10) in the way that Brazil did. More substantially, the assertion that “the volume and the sheer quality of publicity inspired by Dutch Brazil . . . are unrivalled in the early modern period” (10) could have been fortified by means of quantitative analysis, particularly in light of traditional arguments about the so-called blunted impact of the New World on Europe. Nonetheless, the book’s suggestion that colonizing ventures in the Americas shaped and were shaped by public debate in Europe should prove to be sufficiently compelling for fellow Atlantic historians to take up Van Groesen’s invitation of treating Dutch Brazil as a “template” (198).

Guido van Meersbergen, *University of Warwick*

“Het pryee van Zeeland”: Buitenplaatsen op Walcheren 1600–1820.

Martin van den Broeke.

Hilversum: Verloren, 2016. 516 pp. €49.

The island of Walcheren was known as “het pryee van Zeeland,” the bower of Zeeland, by the late seventeenth century, due to its numerous stately homes, manor houses, and pleasure gardens. Martin van den Broeke charts the rise and decline of these *buitenplaatsen* on Walcheren between 1600 and 1820 in a study that exemplifies recent interest in the history of the Dutch country retreats. These places are no longer solely studied from a material perspective, focusing on architecture or gardens; they are regarded as a cultural phenomenon with economic and social underpinnings. Hence, Van den Broeke explores the evolution of the four functions (leisure, profit, power, and status) of the three types of country retreats; he asks how these functions were expressed in the spatial and architectural form of the buildings and gardens, which allows him to interpret their cultural meaning.

Few of the country retreats have survived the ravages of time, which also goes for a significant part of the primary-source materials; but Van den Broeke makes the most of the available cartographic and fiscal records to reconstruct their number. He estimates that the island counted about fifty-five manors (*hofsteden*) and over one hundred smaller pleasure gardens (*lusthoven*) by 1680. Almost all these places were owned by townsfolk who spent the summer, or a shorter period of time, in the countryside. They profited from the economic boom and the process of urbanization experienced by the province until the end of the seventeenth century. In other words, they ploughed the profits that came from their interests in the Dutch India Company back into Walcheren’s suburban countryside. The pleasure gardens were located directly along the towns’ moats (*singels*), or within a commutable distance. Most manor houses had primarily an agricultural function. Only a few of the wealthy showed interest in larger estates, sometimes in combination with securing lordly rights over the surrounding countryside.

In the subsequent phase of expansion (1670–1720), the number of country retreats increased. Those close to the towns of Middelburg and Vlissingen were predominantly used for leisure purposes, whereas the manors and houses further away retained their economic functions. The possession of a country house with geometric gardens, captured on illustrations, became a marker of social status for urban regents. Clusters of stately homes belonging to intermarried families of the same political inclination emerged during this period of political factionalism, and possession became hereditary—in contrast to, for example, the practices of merchant owners. This expansion period was succeeded by ones of beautification (1720–70) and decline (1770–1820), during which the number of country retreats fell. This was a gradual process, in which stately homes owned by the wealthiest urbanites overtook homesteads in importance, while other well-to-do owners maintained their pleasure gardens in the immediate surroundings of the town. Consequently, the architecture of the stately home and its garden became an important indicator of social status. These developments accelerated in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as the number of regent families decreased and their political and economic power became relatively weaker. Walcheren experienced a decline of urban commerce and a process of de-urbanization, whereas agriculture became an important source of economic growth. The remaining stately homes, with landscape-style gardens, became primarily a source of in-group distinction for the surviving notable urban families, and an integral part of their lifestyle.

Van den Broeke provides what is basically an economic explanation for the cultural phenomenon of country life in early modern Walcheren: that is, the changing relationship between town and countryside. The economic rise of Middelburg and Vlissingen resulted in the emergence of a wealthy citizenry that invested in rural stately houses, manors, and pleasure gardens out of economic considerations and for leisure purposes. With the reversal of the fortunes of town and countryside in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the country retreats gradually gave way to agriculture, and it was mostly members of the urban ruling elites who kept hold of their stately homes. In line with this process, the diverse functions of the country estates gradually disappeared in favor of an emphasis on their value as a means of demonstrating the owners' social status, who increasingly belonged to a limited group of urban notable families. Thus the preferences of the owners of the country retreats provide a social-cultural explanation for changes in their forms and uses. This narrative is well documented and illustrated by numerous examples, although a more analytical approach would have certainly strengthened the argument. At times, the rather rigorous distinction in phases obscures the long-term developments and the otherwise nuanced descriptions of the divergent experiences of country life. Above all, however, this book is a welcome and valuable contribution to the historiography of early modern Zeeland and of elite culture in the Dutch Republic.

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